

# ED356753 1992-10-00 Creating Distinctiveness: Lessons from Uncommon Colleges and Universities. ERIC Digest.

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# Creating Distinctiveness: Lessons from Uncommon Colleges and Universities. ERIC Digest.

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There is a sameness about the undergraduate programs of many of America's colleges and universities, despite their many differences in origin, size, and location. Even so, most define themselves as unique by emphasizing a particular program here or an unusual characteristic there. Yet few stray far from the basic patterns that define their missions, organize their faculties, and structure their curricula.

A few colleges and universities, however, are fundamentally different. We call these distinctive institutions and are fascinated by their origins and practices, for they remind us that significant educational innovations can be initiated and sustained.

## WHAT IS INSTITUTIONAL DISTINCTIVENESS?

Distinctive colleges and universities share certain characteristics: a unifying theme or vision of what education should be, the expression of this theme or vision in all or most institutional activities, and the striving for excellence to achieve their purpose.

Ultimately, the distinctive institution is a product of a social contract among colleagues to organize their efforts around a unifying purpose. Institutional distinctiveness results when both internal and external constituents support the values and vision that drive a college or university's curriculum and educational practices (Clark 1970; Kuh and Whitt 1988).

## WHAT LESSONS CAN WE LEARN FROM DISTINCTIVE COLLEGES?

Distinctive schools often develop in response to newly emerging societal or community needs unmet by existing colleges and universities. Witness the founding of Berea College inspired by the educational needs of Appalachians or Deep Springs founded to develop national leaders. They may also develop from strains within academe itself, as was the case when Alexander Meiklejohn founded the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin or Robert Hutchins the undergraduate College at the University of Chicago. Threat of collapse or university failure also can precipitate a college developing a distinctive educational philosophy as the history of St. John's indicates. Not all distinctive colleges endure. Some such as Antioch have a long history of

distinctiveness, while others such as Black Mountain College are an experiment that does not endure. Some are highly prescriptive, while others give students almost unlimited academic choice. Some follow a progressive or whole-person approach, while others advocate an intellectual or neo-classical philosophy of education.

The educational program of some schools such as the College of the Atlantic draws fully upon its geographical setting, while others such as St. John's take no heed. Regardless of their life span, degree of prescriptiveness, educational philosophy, or setting, distinctive colleges challenge conventional ideas about higher education and inspire us to engage both students and faculty more fully in undergraduate education.

## WHAT ARE THE LURES AND PERILS OF DISTINCTIVENESS?

Institutional distinctiveness is an appealing yet elusive concept that suggests uncommon leadership and institutional excellence. Distinctive colleges and universities often have prospective students and faculty clamoring to join. Once there, they find an esprit de corps that often makes their lives more enjoyable and also aids in promotion and development activities and in making management decisions.

Distinctiveness also has its perils. Being highly distinctive can hurt an institution, primarily by limiting it to a very small market niche. Also, the very values that unify the college may work as a constraint against further change necessary for survival.

Few colleges and universities find it easy to be distinctive. Certain factors such as public control, lack of external support for an institution's guiding vision, the expectations of regional and programmatic accrediting associations, and standardized norms for excellence may serve to inhibit developing distinctive educational practices.

## WHAT STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT MODELS MAY LEAD TO DISTINCTIVENESS?

Commitment to a particular educational "calling" does not assure that students will enroll and that foundations and individuals will donate money. Visionaries and idealists may benefit from strategic management techniques to help ensure the success of colleges and universities.

Strategic management literature reflects two major models: the adaptive and the interpretive (Chaffee 1984). Adherence to the adaptive model, which emphasizes resource acquisition, environmental realities, and market trends, may produce competitive advantage in the marketplace without creating institutional distinctiveness. In contrast, the interpretive model's emphasis on articulating values and developing a culture warranting individuals' commitment may ignore market realities in the highly competitive world of higher education.

The Porter Generic Model (Porter 1985) is a commonly used model for organizing business strategies. When applied to strategic management decisions, the model illustrates how colleges and universities can differentiate themselves and gain a competitive edge. However, this approach will not produce institutional distinctiveness. In the long run the truly distinctive school is likely to result from a merging of both the paradigms.

## WHAT RECOMMENDATIONS CAN BE MADE TO LEADERS AND RESEARCHERS?

Higher education leaders contemplating whether to pursue distinctiveness can follow a six-step plan to determine the viability of the strategy. Although the plan uses the tools of adaptive strategic management, ultimately the strategy is based on the interpretive model of management.

1. Conduct historical and cultural analyses to uncover institutional values.
2. Make a paradigm check to determine which strategic management model guides their own and their institution's actions.
3. Clarify, communicate, and act on unifying values and themes.
4. Conduct a situation analysis to determine if the current state of the college or university makes it a likely candidate for distinctiveness.
5. Select the desired level of market exposure, whether it be local, regional, or national.
6. Execute market research to uncover markets to which the college or university's values and educational vision may appeal.

Combining the tools of adaptive management with the perspective of interpretive management increases the likelihood that a distinctive college or university will not only survive but indeed thrive in the marketplace. While the benefits of attending a distinctive college or university have not been well researched, it appears that students, as well as faculty and indeed the entire system of higher education, benefit from the existence of distinctive schools (Townsend 1989).

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